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Characteristics of Effective Spelling Instruction

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The author's experience with helping his granddaughters learn their spelling words led to a review of the literature on spelling theory and instruction. The purpose of this review was to answer the following questions: How should spelling words be chosen? Should spelling words be taught and tested in the list format? Is there a problem with using the same word list for all students? And, finally, what strategies should be taught to develop more effective spellers? By examining and responding to these questions, the author delineates a list of key characteristics to effectively teach spelling.

WHAT IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE way to teach spelling? I asked myself this question after several weeks of helping my granddaughters review spelling words for their Friday test. My granddaughters were experiencing a program that was similar to many of those that I have observed over the years as a student, a teacher, and an administrator. The spelling program was based on a commercial textbook where weekly word lists and exercises were selected and sequenced by the publishers. Each week word lists were brought home on Monday; a word pattern or phonic generalization illustrated by that week's list of words was discussed; textbook pages were assigned and completed throughout the week; and a spelling test was given on Friday. Based upon the recollections of my granddaughters, all the students in their class received the same spelling list; there were no weekly pretests; and students did not correct their own tests. When I asked my granddaughters to explain what they did when they had to spell a new word, neither could articulate any strategies or techniques for helping them do so.

For many years spelling has been taught in a fashion similar to the program experienced by my granddaughters (Zutell, 1980). By examining the literature, I sought to answer the following questions: How should the words be chosen? Should spelling words be taught and tested in the list format? Is there a problem with using the same word list for all students? And, finally, what strategies should be taught to develop more effective spellers? Examining and responding to these questions led to a delineation of the instructional characteristics that need to be incorporated in an effective spelling program.

How Should the Words be Chosen?

Weekly spelling words can be selected by the teacher, the student, or both the teacher and the student. Based on the literature, four sources for selecting spelling words include: (1) commercially published spelling textbooks, (2) the students' content area reading classes, (3) the students' reading literature, and (4) the students' writing.

Heald-Taylor (1998) presented three paradigms of spelling instruction, each suggesting a different source from which teachers could choose spelling words. The first paradigm, referred to as *traditional*,

characterized spelling as studying and learning words in lists as presented in commercially published spellers. Most teachers teach spelling using this paradigm. Johnston (2001), after interviewing 42 teachers in grades two through five, reported that 93 percent of the teachers surveyed used commercial spelling programs to select the words and program the spelling activities.

The second paradigm, referred to as *transitional*, acknowledges that spelling, reading, and writing are synchronized (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2004; Heald-Taylor, 1998). In the transitional method, learning to spell is based on integrating phonetic, graphic, and syntactic letter patterns with semantics. From this perspective, spelling is intimately interwoven into a student's reading and writing across all subject areas. When using the transitional paradigm as a basis for choosing spelling words, selected words must originate, at least partially, from a student's reading and writing material so that spelling rules are learned and practiced in a meaningful context.

Like the traditional approach where words are presented in lists, the transitional approach relies upon direct instruction, spelling rules, study techniques, and weekly tests. However, unlike the traditional method, the words are learned and practiced in conjunction with different types of word study techniques such as word sorts and word games (Bear et al., 2004). Spelling lists and study procedures are drawn from formal spelling textbooks, student reading and writing, and content subjects. A key element of the transitional approach is that children are tested on words at the beginning of the week and are required to study only those words missed on the pretest.

The third paradigm, referred to as *student-oriented*, describes spelling as developmental and uses reading and writing as the key contexts for learning to spell (Heald-Taylor, 1998). Word lists are derived and personalized solely from a student's reading and writing. This theory is grounded on cognitive developmental theory (Piaget, 1973) and social-constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1962). As spellers mature, they inductively learn to spell from their reading and writing experiences. After a review of the literature, Krashen (1993) reported that most words people know how to spell were learned incidentally

through reading. Loeffler (2005) outlined a spelling program that focused solely on the use of a spelling rubric based on each student's daily writing activities. In this spelling program, the teacher evaluated the students' ability to spell words from their written assignments by measuring their ability to find their misspelled words. Loeffler found this technique more effective than having his students memorize words for a Friday test only to have them misspell the same words in their writing. The use of a spelling rubric recognized the importance of using a student's ability to identify misspelled words, helped the teacher identify the strategies a student was using, and made spelling a more meaningful task because the student used it in a personal context.

In recent years, many teachers have worked to integrate different subjects in their curriculum, specifically linking the areas of spelling, writing, and reading (Moore, Moore, Cunningham, & Cunningham, 1994). Many teachers had observed students who received excellent scores on the weekly spelling tests but misspelled the same words on writing assignments submitted shortly after the test. These teachers attempted to alter this inconsistent behavior--accurate list spelling but inaccurate daily writing spelling--by using words that were relevant to the material being read in class. In fact, Johnston (2001) found that about 20 percent of the teachers reported integrating spelling as they used spelling words related to other areas of study. Some teachers stressed the importance of teaching spelling skills incidentally through the use of extensive reading and writing activities. These teachers created word lists based on student readings and classroom thematic units, often having the students choose the words they thought they needed to learn to spell. With this method, it was anticipated that students would be more interested in their spelling words, become more self-directed, develop an interest in learning to spell new words, and select words whose proper spelling would remain in long term memory.

The success of this method of word selection has been difficult to determine because the nature of this type of program is unique to the teacher and to his or her own skills at developing a spelling curriculum. Schlagal and Trathen (1998) concluded that the incidental teaching of spelling through reading and writing was important and necessary, but

also advised teachers to systematically teach spelling using high-frequency words in lists leveled to the ability of the learner.

Based on this review, teachers should select spelling words from their spelling textbook, students' content area reading material, students' reading literature, and students' writing. Spelling words originating from the students' reading and writing would have to be individualized. Using a student-directed spelling program to complement commercially-prepared word lists would be ideal; students would be made responsible for learning words unique to their own reading and writing programs.

Should Spelling Words be Taught and Tested in the Word List Format?

After their review of the literature, Fitzsimmons and Loomer (1978) reported that spelling lessons offered in a word list format *were effective* when teachers followed the following guidelines:

- young spellers studied high frequency words;
- students corrected their own spelling (under teacher supervision);
- teachers used the pretest-teach-test method of delivery and assessment; and
- spelling was allotted between 60 and 75 minutes of instructional time per week.

However, Fitzsimmons and Loomer also reported that many teachers used a number of practices that *were ineffective*. These practices included:

- writing words several times each to ensure retention;
- encouraging students to depend heavily on phonic rules;
- having students deduct their own methods to study words; and

- presenting words in a sentence rather than in a list to introduce the spelling words.

Is There a Problem with Using the Same Word List for All Students?

An important line of research developed in the 1970s and 1980s was the developmental nature of spelling (Henderson & Templeton, 1986; Morris, 1981). Children were hypothesized to progress through six stages of spelling knowledge. Several prominent researchers characterized six stages of spelling (Bear & Templeton, 1998; Henderson & Templeton, 1986). These researchers summarize the stages as follows:

> *Stage 1.* Prephonemic spelling is characterized by children aged 1 to 7 who listen to stories, write using scribbles, and are becoming aware of phonemes.
>
> *Stage 2.* Semiphonemic spelling is a characterized by children aged 4 to 7 who use invented spelling, compare and contrast initial and final consonants using pictures and word sorts, and can typically write the initial and final consonants of words.
>
> *Stage 3.* Letter name spelling is a characterized by children aged 5 to 9 who compare and contrast short vowel word families and focus on the sound and spelling of words containing one short vowel, then compare across short vowel patterns (i.e., c-v-c pattern).
>
> *Stage 4.* Within-word pattern spelling is characterized by children aged 6.5 to 12 who spell words with long vowel patterns (CVCe, CVVC, CVV) and complex single syllable words (CVck; CVght; and dipthongs).
>
> *Stage 5.* Syllable juncture spelling is characterized by children aged 8 to 14 who spell words using rules of syllabication, common affixes, verb tenses, and low-frequency vowel patterns.

Stage 6. Derivational constancy spelling is characterized by children aged 10 to 18 who connect meaning to the spelling words through the use of similar bases and roots. For example, students at this stage are aided in their spelling of the word *calculator* by understanding the relationship between *calculate*, *calculation*, and *calculus*.

When spelling is viewed as developmental, it has a profound effect on how spelling needs to be taught. If spelling is developmental, teachers must level the lists of words given to meet the individual needs of their students. Teachers need to consider different word lists for individual students within the same classroom; different word lists need to be assigned that vary characteristically in terms of letter pattern and syllable difficulty. Several researchers developed a guideline to help teachers align the developmental level of the speller to the word lists being assigned for testing (Morris, Blanton, Blanton, & Perney, 1995; Templeton & Morris, 1999). Like the instructional reading level estimated in an *Informal Reading Level*, student word lists can be adapted to meet the instructional spelling levels of students by assigning less challenging lists of words to students who consistently spell fewer than 40 percent of the words correctly on grade-level lists of words presented on pretests or final tests. Such a guideline is helpful and practical when used by teachers to logically differentiate the spelling lists given to their students to better meet their individual spelling needs and create a more effective spelling program. It would also seem reasonable that those students who consistently spell all or almost all of their pretest words should be given more challenging lists of words.

A key finding in the 1990s was that low-achieving spellers had considerable difficulty learning to spell when given words estimated to be at their frustration level. These spellers apparently did not have sufficient orthographic knowledge to benefit from spelling instruction aimed at words typically given to students at their grade level; they were often the students who, even when they did spell accurately on a Friday test, were inaccurately spelling the same words in subsequent weeks in daily work (Morris, Nelson, & Perney, 1986; Schlagal & Trathen, 1998). Morris, Blanton, Blanton, Nowacek, and Perney (1995) found that when low achieving students were taught using word lists intended for younger

students, they improved their spelling skills appreciably. Results from a study by Schlagal, Trathen, Mock, and McIntire (as cited in Schlaga, & Trathen, 1998) found that by leveling spelling instruction to the instructional needs of low-achieving students, the students made significant gains in both spelling and reading.

Johnston (2001) found that nearly all teachers (95%) reported adapting the spelling words assigned to their students, although the most common modification was typically to give less capable spellers fewer words from the assigned class list. While the need to differentiate spelling is evident to many teachers, only 28 percent of the teachers surveyed reported giving less capable spellers easier words, a practice that would more appropriately address their developmental needs. Along with a common-sense approach of adjusting the levels of the words used based upon pretest or final test scores (children who consistently score below 40% or near 100%), teachers need to require students to keep a log of their misspelled words from their posttests. If lists of words are too difficult, then the number of entries into a log is another informal method to alert the teacher to the student possibly operating at a level of frustration. Furthermore, a log allows one to isolate and practice personally troublesome words and teaches the student self-responsibility as well.

Viewing spelling as developmental and viewing students at different stages of learning to spell is important if teachers want to strengthen the quality of their spelling program. Bear et al. (2004) offer teachers a detailed spelling inventory specifically geared to primary, intermediate, and upper level students. These spelling inventories estimate the spelling stage of a student as well as a student's use of phonics, syllables, affixes, and derivational relations. These inventories underscore the importance many researchers place on adjusting word lists to student skill level and on assessing students who consistently find word lists too difficult or too easy. Schlagal and Trathen (1998), after studying the effect of leveling spelling instruction to high, medium, and low ability spellers, concluded that the leveled spelling was particularly effective in improving the skills of low and mid-level ability spellers.

What Strategies Should be Taught to Develop More Effective Spellers?

Frequently, teachers do not teach students strategies regarding how to study their spelling words. Asselin (2002) reported that poor spellers knew and used fewer strategies, tending to sound out words letter by letter. On the other hand, good spellers used visual imagery, broke words into chunks, recognized certain parts of words, combined word segments with a visual image of the word, and used active monitoring by slowly pronouncing words to cue auditory memory, using phonics initially, and then adding visual and semantic information.

Spelling strategies can be learned that will improve student spelling. Students need to be taught to:

- sound out each word slowly, look for visual patterns (usually a pattern is highlighted in a word list such as an *–ly* ending);
- create an analogy when needed (remembering *my* and *play* can help you spell *may*);
- think about word meaning (especially, at their age, homophones like *meet* and *meat*);
- examine words structurally for prefixes, suffixes, and roots; and
- look for word families such as *–ake* in bake, cake, and rake.

In addition, when words are given in lists on a weekly basis, students need to learn a procedure to study words presented to them in this format, a procedure commonly cited in the literature such as "look, say, cover, write, check, and repeat if misspelled" (Griffith & Leavell, 1995-96).

Conclusion

Spelling is a critical aspect of the curriculum that is integral to the process of reading. It is a subject that needs to be taught thoughtfully and

consciously. From examining the research, effective spelling instruction consists of:

- Giving weekly spelling lists and administering weekly tests, as the difficulty of the words is adjusted to the instructional level of the speller.
- Administering words in a pretest-teach-posttest format with students self-correcting the tests as much as possible.
- Including words originating from other subjects and from students' own reading and writing in conjunction with the commercially prepared word lists.
- Keeping records, such as a log, that notes misspelled words offers the student, parent, and teacher, a way to isolate and practice words that are personally difficult for a student to spell.
- Teaching strategies and procedures that assist students to learn new words.

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